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ABSTRACT

As part of the Assessing the New Federalism Project, this study examines the number of hours preschool children with employed mothers spent in child care in 1997, how the number of hours in child care varied across selected states, and how the amount of time in care differed across the states for children of different ages and income groups. Data are from the National Survey of America's Families, a survey of 44,461 households representative of the United States as a whole and 12 selected states. Findings show that child care plays an important role in the lives of many U.S. families. Despite enormous variation across the 12 states examined, a sizable proportion of preschool children with employed mothers are in care for a significant number of hours each week, regardless of state of residence, age, or family income. A second finding is that while national patterns hold across most states, it is clear that policymakers cannot rely on national child care data to capture the patterns in individual states. Every national pattern was contradicted by at least one state. The findings highlight the complexities facing policymakers as they work to develop policies to support the child care choices of families. (SLD)

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NEW FEDERALISM
National Survey of America's Families

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THE HOURS THAT CHILDREN UNDER FIVE SPEND IN CHILD CARE: VARIATION ACROSS STATES

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Jeffrey Capizzano and Gina Adams

A large majority of preschool children with employed mothers currently spend at least some time each week in the care of individuals who are not their parents. Fueled by increases in workforce participation among women, work requirements for single mothers receiving public assistance, and parental concerns over the "school-readiness" of preschoolers, the number of children under five in child care has increased significantly over the past three decades. In fact, in 1997, 77 percent of preschool children with employed mothers were cared for in child care centers, in family child care homes, by relatives, or by nannies for at least some time each week (Capizzano, Adams, and Sonenstein 2000). Largely because of this growing reliance on nonparental care, the topic of early childhood care and education has emerged both as an issue of public concern and a major component of U.S. social policy.

Across states, a sizable proportion of preschool children with employed mothers are in full-time child care.

Examining Child Care at the State Level

While federal child care policy has received national attention in recent years, states and localities have historically been at the center of child care policymaking. States, for example, establish many of the child care subsidy policies—such as reimbursement rates for child care providers and copayment rates for recipients of child care assistance—and also regulate child care quality. In 1996, changes to federal child care policy outlined in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) brought increased attention to the role of states in child care policymaking. For example, PRWORA enhanced the role of state policymakers by ending the child care entitlement for welfare recipients, combining a number of diverse child care funding streams into a single block grant, and increasing child care funding to states.

In light of these changes to federal policy, understanding state-level patterns of child care use has taken on added significance. Yet relatively little is known about child care patterns in individual states or how they vary across states because most of what we know about the use of child care is gathered from nationally representative surveys that are not designed to capture state-level child care patterns. The significant variation that exists in child care usage across states is most likely due to such differences as labor force patterns, child care costs and supply, and child care policies. A better understanding of state-level patterns of care will provide state policymakers with additional information when forming child care policy and will assist them in identifying the likely impact of policy changes.

The focus here is on an aspect of child care that is important to state policymakers: the number of hours that children spend in care each week. Research has found that the hours spent in care, especially when combined with such factors as family characteristics and the quality of care used, can affect a child's social and cognitive development (NICHD Early Childhood Research Network 1998).[1]

This brief examines the number of hours that preschool children with employed mothers spent in child care in 1997, how the number of hours spent in care varied across selected states, and

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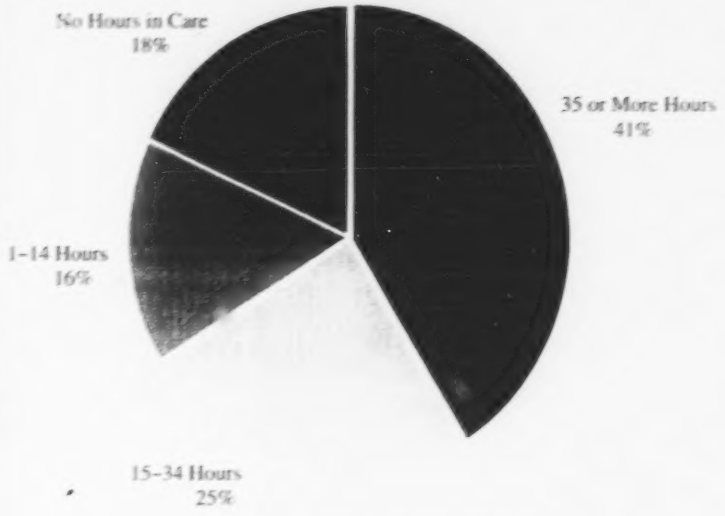
Figure 1
National Estimates of the Hours Spent in Nonparental Care by Children under Five with Employed Mothers (1997)



Source: Urban Institute calculations from the 1997 National Survey of America's Families.

how the amount of time in care differed across states for children of different age and income groups. We begin by looking at national and state estimates of the hours that children under five with employed mothers spent in care, and we then proceed to focus specifically on how these patterns vary for children whose mothers are employed full-time, children of different ages (infants and toddlers contrasted with three- and four-year-olds), and children from higher- and low-income families.

The National Survey of America's Families

Data from the 1997 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF)[2] are used to determine the hours that preschool children spend in care each week. The NSAF oversampled households with income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) and collected child care information on a nationally representative sample of children as well as on representative samples of children in 12 states.[3] For randomly selected children in the sample households, interviews were conducted with the person most knowledgeable about each child. From these interviews, data were collected about the types of care used and the number of hours that the child spent in each form of care.[4] Since the mother was most often the most knowledgeable adult, the term "mother" is used here to refer to this respondent.[5] For this analysis we focus only on children under five whose mothers were interviewed during the nonsummer months.[6] We also restrict our analysis to preschool children whose mothers were employed.

For this analysis, the hours that each child spent in care across all reported nonparental arrangements were totaled and the child was then placed in one of four categories: "full-time care" (35 or more hours per week), "part-time care" (15 to 34 hours per week), "minimal care" (1 to 14 hours per week), and "no hours in child care" (no regular hours in a nonparental child care arrangement).[7]

How Many Hours per Week Are Children in Child Care?

The National Picture

In the United States overall, a significant proportion of preschool children with employed mothers (41 percent) are in care for 35 or more hours per week (figure 1). Another 25 percent of preschool children are in care 15 to 34 hours per week, while 16 percent are in care for 1 to 14 hours and 18 percent of children spend no hours in care (see note 7).

State Patterns

These percentages, however, vary substantially across the states (figure 2). The focus below is on the states with the greatest differences in the percentage of preschool children in the hours categories.[8] Specifically, findings show that:

- Two of the southern states—Mississippi and Alabama—have the highest percentages of children in full-time care, with over half of preschool children with employed mothers in full-time care (59 and 56 percent, respectively). Texas also has a high number of preschool children in full-time care (46 percent).
- Conversely, California, Massachusetts, and Washington have the lowest percentages of children in full-time care, with less than one in three children in care for 35 hours or more per week (29, 29, and 33 percent, respectively).
- California and Washington have the highest proportions of children who spend no hours in child care and are two of the states with the lowest use of full-time care (table 1). Each has at least one-quarter of preschool children who spend no regular hours in care (30 and 26 percent, respectively). In contrast, Michigan has the lowest percentage of children with no hours in child care (13 percent).

While these findings focus on full-time care and no reported hours in care, the extent of state variation continues beyond these categories. Across all of the hours categories, even those states that look similar in one category may differ in others. For example, both California and Massachusetts have small percentages of children in full-time care (29 percent each), but the percentages of children

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in the other hours categories are very different (table 1). Such patterns highlight the diversity of child care utilization across states and point to the unique child care challenges that state policymakers and administrators face in making decisions about their states.

Hours That Preschool Children with Full-Time Employed Mothers Spend in Child Care

The amount of time that children spend in care is likely to be related to the hours that their mothers work. Therefore, it is important to distinguish the differences in child care hours across states that result from employment patterns versus other potential factors. We begin by looking only at the hours in care for those children whose mothers are employed full-time.

Table 1
Children under Five with Employed Mothers in Different Hours of Nonparental Care, by Selected Characteristics and State

	US (%)	AL (%)	CA (%)	FL (%)	MA (%)	MI (%)	MN (%)	MS (%)	NJ (%)	NY (%)	TX (%)	WA (%)	WI (%)
All Children													
No Hours in Care	**18**	14	**30**	20	22	**13**	17	14	24	17	15	**26**	17
1 to 14 Hours	**16**	12	18	13	**22**	19	16	**10**	14	19	15	16	18
15 to 34 Hours	**25**	**19**	23	23	27	28	27	**17**	25	20	23	25	26
35 or More Hours	**41**	**56**	**29**	44	**29**	40	39	**59**	38	44	46	**33**	39
Sample Size[a]	(4,823)	(286)	(288)	(317)	(339)	(320)	(378)	(277)	(341)	(305)	(309)	(304)	(656)
Mothers Working Full-Time													
No Hours in Care	**17**	12	**27**	20	21	14	20	13	23	19	14	**33**	13
1 to 14 Hours	**12**	10	17	**6**	14	15	10	10	12	10	13	9	17
15 to 34 Hours	**18**	14	19	18	24	19	17	12	20	14	22	17	22
35 or More Hours	**52**	**64**	**38**	55	**40**	52	52	**65**	45	57	52	**41**	49
Sample Size[a]	(3,399)	(229)	(210)	(228)	(198)	(197)	(258)	(227)	(240)	(197)	(247)	(206)	(451)
Child's Age													
Younger Than Three Years													
No Hours in Care	**21+**	21+	**35**	28+	30+	**15**	21+	17	**32+**	24+	15	27	21
1 to 14 Hours	**17**	11	20	12	15+	21	18	**10**	12	22	14	15	20
15 to 34 Hours	**23+**	19	19	21	29	26	26	19	25	**16+**	25	26	23
35 or More Hours	**39**	49+	**26**	38+	**27**	38	35	**54+**	**31+**	39+	45	32	36
Sample Size[a]	(2,572)	(148)	(150)	(168)	(179)	(168)	(205)	(143)	(186)	(158)	(160)	(173)	(353)
Three to Four Years													
No Hours in Care	**13**	**4+**	**23**	**8+**	12+	11	11+	9	11+	9+	16	**25**	13
1 to 14 Hours	**14**	12	16	14	**32+**	15	14	9	17	15	16	18	15
15 to 34 Hours	**28**	**19**	28	27	25	30	29	**15**	24	26+	21	22	30
35 or More Hours	**44**	**64+**	**33**	52+	**31**	43	45	**67+**	47+	50+	47	35	42
Sample Size[a]	(2,251)	(138)	(138)	(149)	(160)	(152)	(173)	(134)	(155)	(147)	(149)	(131)	(303)
Income As a Percentage of the FPL													
200 Percent and Below													
No Hours in Care	**23+**	17	**33**	25	18	21+	22	**13**	27	20	28+	**33**	24+
1 to 14 Hours	**16**	17	15	11	17	21	17	13	**11**	20	11	19	15
15 to 34 Hours	**21+**	23	20	16+	18+	25	28	25+	21	20	18	**13+**	26
35 or More Hours	**40**	43+	32	**48**	47+	34	34	49+	41	40	44	35	36
Sample Size[a]	(2,290)	(148)	(161)	(168)	(114)	(143)	(169)	(152)	(121)	(144)	(179)	(133)	(314)
Above 200 Percent													
No Hours in Care	**16+**	12	**27**	16	23	**10+**	15	15	22	15	**6+**	23	15+
1 to 14 Hours	**15**	**8**	21	14	**23**	18	16	**7**	15	18	18	15	19
15 to 34 Hours	**27+**	**16**	25	29+	29+	29	27	**10+**	26	**20**	28	30+	26
35 or More Hours	**42**	**64+**	**27**	41	**24+**	43	41	**68+**	37	46	48	**32**	40
Sample Size[a]	(2,533)	(138)	(127)	(149)	(225)	(177)	(209)	(125)	(220)	(161)	(130)	(171)	(342)

Source: Urban Institute calculations from the 1997 National Survey of America's Families.

Notes: Actual percentages may vary on average +/– 3 percentage points from national estimates, +/– 5 percentage points from overall state estimates, and +/– 7 percentage points from state estimates for children of different ages and income levels. Percentages do not sum to 100 as a result of rounding. The NSAF's questions focused on nonparental arrangements and did not include questions about care provided by another parent, care for the child while the parent was at work, or care for the child at home by a self-employed parent. Those respondents not reporting a child care arrangement are assumed to be in one of these forms of care and are coded as having no hours in nonparental care.

a. Sample sizes in parentheses. **Bold** type indicates that the estimate is significantly different from the national average at the .05 level. Plus (+) indicates a significant difference between the categories within age and income in a state at the .05 level (i.e., younger children are different from older children).

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The Nation Overall

Nationwide, while 41 percent of all preschool children with employed mothers are in full-time care, the proportion increases to 52 percent for those children whose mothers are employed full-time (table 1). Another 18 percent of children under five with mothers employed full-time are in part-time care (15 to 34 hours), while 12 percent are in care for 1 to 14 hours, and 17 percent spend no hours in nonparental care.

Variation across the States

By looking only at the children of mothers employed full-time, we can determine whether differences in the time that children spend in care can be explained simply by state variations in the proportion of mothers who work full-time. Data show that the variation across states persists even when only children with mothers employed full-time are analyzed. For example, Mississippi and Alabama still have the highest percentages of children in full-time care (65 and 64 percent respectively). At the opposite end of the range, California, Massachusetts, and Washington (38, 40, and 41 percent, respectively) have the lowest proportions of these children in full-time care. Additionally, Washington and California still have the largest percentages of children who spend no regular hours in care (33 and 27 percent, respectively).

It appears that one of the possible reasons for differences in the number of hours that children are in care across states—the proportion of mothers working full-time—does not explain state variation. Other factors, some of which are discussed later in the brief, must explain these differences in the hours that children spend in care.

Hours That Children of Different Ages Spend in Child Care

Parents make child care choices for their infants and toddlers that often differ from choices they make about care for their three- and four-year-olds. Preschool children of different ages have different needs, which may be reflected in the hours that parents place them in care. Therefore, it is important to look separately at the hours spent in care by children under three and by three- and four-year-olds.

National Patterns

Generally, three- and four-year-olds are somewhat more likely to be in care for more hours than are children under three (see table 1). In the United States as a whole, three- and four-year-olds are slightly more likely to be in full-time care (44 percent compared with 39 percent) and more likely to be in part-time care (28 percent compared with 23 percent). Additionally, only 13 percent of three- and four-year-olds spend no hours in care, while 21 percent of children under three are in this category.

Across the States

Individual states, however, vary considerably in the distribution of child care hours for both younger and older preschool children (figure 3).

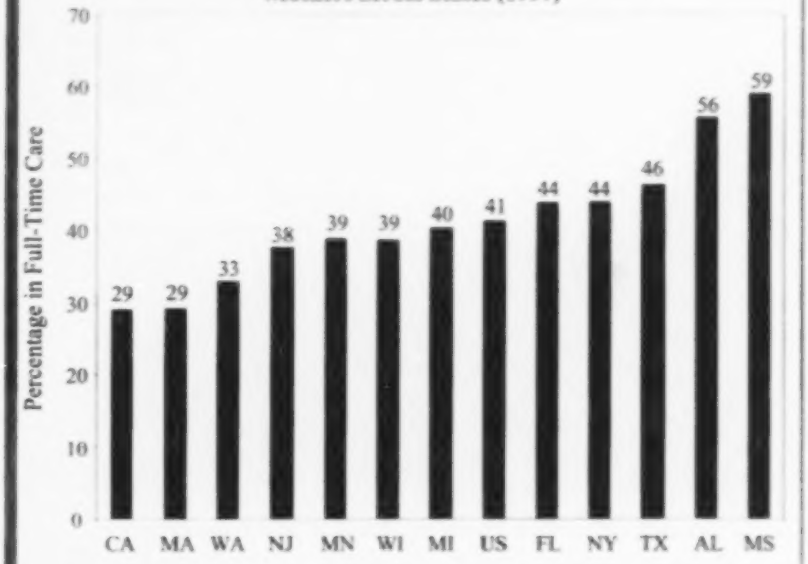
Infants and Toddlers. Among infants and toddlers, data show that:

- In Mississippi, Alabama, and Texas, about half of children under three with employed mothers are in care for 35 or more hours a week (54, 49, and 45 percent, respectively). Conversely, in California and Massachusetts, only about one in four children under three is in care for 35 hours or more per week (26 and 27 percent, respectively).
- California has the highest percentage of very young children who spend no regular hours in child care (35 percent), while Michigan, Texas, and Mississippi have the lowest percentage of very young children in this category (15, 15, and 17 percent, respectively) (table 1).

Three- and Four-Year-Olds. Similarly, among three- and four-year-old children:

- Mississippi and Alabama have the highest percentages of three- and four-year-olds in full-time care (67 and 64 percent, respectively). These percentages are twice as large as those for California, Massachusetts, and Washington (33, 31, and 35 percent, respectively).
- Across most states, there are few three- and four-year-olds with employed mothers who spend no hours in nonparental care. Alabama has the lowest percentage in this category—only 4 percent.

Figure 2
Use of Full-Time Care among Children under Five with Employed Mothers across States (1997)



Source: Urban Institute calculations from the 1997 National Survey of America's Families.

Note: Full-time care is 35 or more hours per week.

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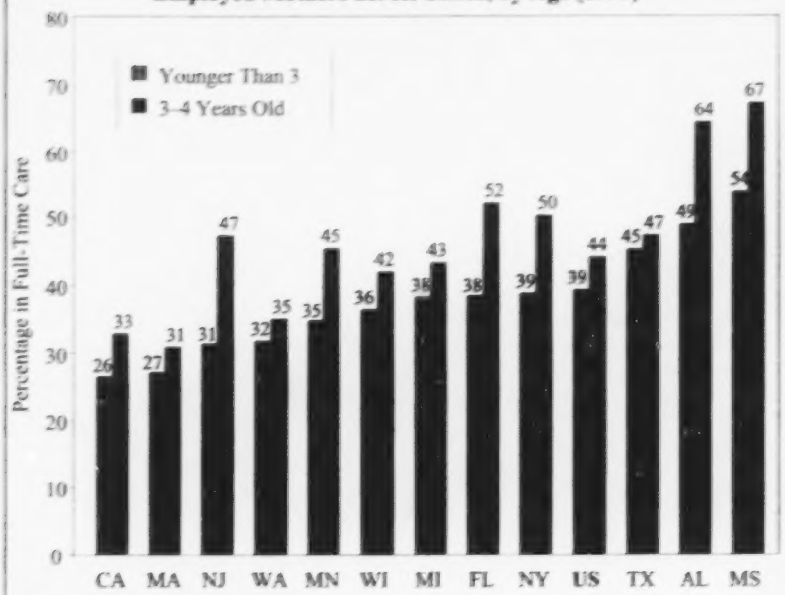
Figure 3
Use of Full-Time Care among Children under Five with Employed Mothers across States, by Age (1997)



Source: Urban Institute calculations from the 1997 National Survey of America's Families.

Note: Full-time care is 35 or more hours per week.

Additionally, less than 1 in 10 children have no reported hours in care in Florida, Mississippi, and New York (8, 9, and 9 percent, respectively).

- However, a few states do have a sizable share of three- and four-year-olds with no regular hours in child care. California and Washington have by far the largest percentages in this category, with 23 and 25 percent of children. This is about six times the proportion found in Alabama (4 percent).

Within the States

There are also differences within states with regard to the time that each age group spends in care. Interestingly, in some states there are large differences in the number of hours that three- and four-year-old children and children under three are in care, while in others the two age groups spend similar amounts of time in care. For example:

- New Jersey, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, and New York each have much larger percentages (at least 10 percentage points greater) of three- and four-year-old children in full-time care than children under three (figure 3).
- Conversely, there are states where older and younger children spend about the same amount of time in child care. For example, in Texas and Washington the percentages across all hours categories are very similar for both older and younger preschool children (table 1).

Time That Children in Families with Different Incomes Spend in Child Care

With changes to welfare policy geared toward moving welfare recipients into work, child care use among low-income families has been an important focus of policymakers. Within this context, it is useful to understand how much time children with employed mothers in low-income families[9] spend in care, how the length of time varies by state, and how the hours that low-income children spend in care compare with children in higher-income families (family income above 200 percent of the FPL).

Nationally

In general, children in higher-income families spend slightly more time in care than low-income children, though the difference is smaller than might be expected given the link between hours of work and income earned. Nationally, the percentages of preschool children in care for 35 or more hours per week are similar for higher- and low-income children (42 and 40 percent, respectively), while children from higher-income families are more likely to be in part-time care (27 and 21 percent, respectively). Similar percentages of higher- and low-income children spend 1 to 14 hours in care per week (15 and 16 percent, respectively), while higher-income children are less likely than low-income children to spend no hours in non-parental care (16 percent and 23 percent, respectively).

Across the States

There are two ways to examine the differences in the hours of care between children in higher- and low-income families across states. Looking first at the variation across states *within each income group*, the following patterns become evident.

Low-Income Families. Among low-income families:

- There is variation across states in the hours that low-income preschoolers with employed mothers spend in full-time care. For example, almost 50 percent of low-income children are in full-time care in Mississippi (49 percent) and Florida (48 percent) (figure 4). However, only one in three low-income children in California, Michigan, and Minnesota are in full-time care (32, 34, and 34 percent, respectively).
- There is similar variation in other hours categories. For example, 33 percent of low-income children spend no hours in care in California and Washington, while as few as 13 percent of children from low-income families in Mississippi have zero hours in child care (table 1).

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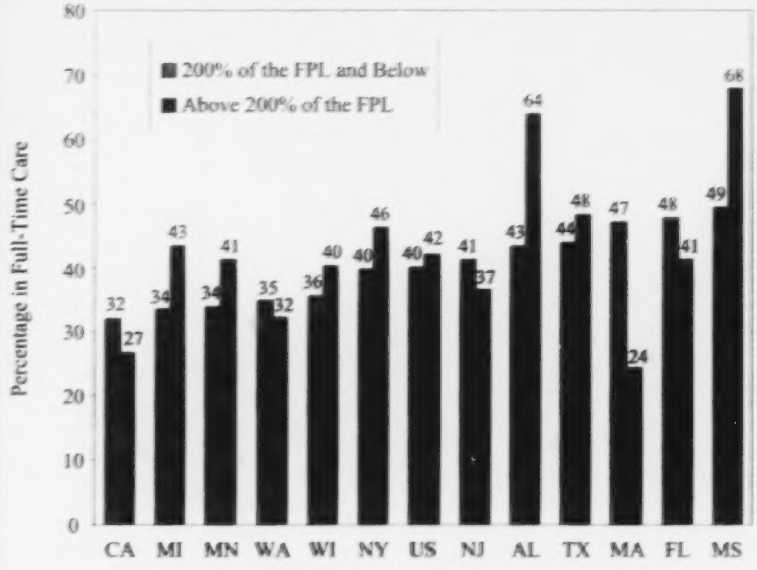
Figure 4
Use of Full-Time Care among Children under Five with Employed Mothers across States, by Income (1997)



Source: Urban Institute calculations from the 1997 National Survey of America's Families.
Note: Full-time care is 35 or more hours per week.

Higher-Income Families. Among higher-income families:

- Even more variation exists across states in the time that children from higher-income families spend in care. For example, there are nearly three times as many higher-income children in full-time care in Mississippi and Alabama (68 and 64 percent, respectively) as in Massachusetts and California (24 and 27 percent, respectively) (figure 4).
- Variation also exists in the proportion of higher-income children in the no-hours-in-care category across states. As many as 27 percent of children are in the no-hours category in California, while as few as 6 percent of children are in this category in Texas (table 1).

Comparisons within States

Another way to examine the patterns of hours spent in care is to examine the differences between income groups *within individual states*. Generally, the percentage of low- and higher-income children in full-time care is similar across many of the states. However, combining the full-time and 15- to 34-hour categories shows that most states have a larger percentage of higher-income children in 15 or more hours of care. In addition:

- Alabama and Mississippi have the largest differences in the percentage of higher- and low-income children in full-time care (21 and 19 percentage points greater, respectively) (figure 4).
- There are some states where low-income children are *more* likely to be in full-time care than higher-income children. However, Massachusetts, with a difference of 23 percentage points, is the only state with a statistically significant difference (47 percent of low-income compared with 24 percent of higher-income children) (figure 4).

Conclusions

Two findings emerge from this review of state-level child care data on the hours that children spend in child care. First, child care plays an important role in the lives of many of America's families. Despite enormous variation across the 12 states examined here, a sizable proportion of preschool children with employed mothers are in care for a significant number of hours each week, regardless of state of residence, age, or family income. Given that recent research has found that very early life activities of children affect brain development and that quality preschool programs assist children in preparing for school, the increasing use of child care reinforces the need for state policymakers to pay close attention to the experiences of children while they are in child care.

Second, while national patterns generally hold across most states, it is clear that policymakers cannot rely on national child care data to accurately capture patterns of child care utilization existing in individual states. Indeed, every national pattern observed was contradicted by at least one state. For example, while older children are in care longer hours than younger children nationally, in Washington or Texas this difference is negligible. Similarly, while higher-income children nationally are in care for longer hours, this is clearly not evident in Massachusetts.

Simply documenting differences that exist in the hours that children spend in care is only the first step to better understanding state-level patterns of child care. The next step is to uncover the factors associated with these differences. The states analyzed here differ across a host of demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural variables, as well as in state child care policies and in child care costs and supply. Initial examination of these data show that no single factor—such as differences in the labor force patterns of mothers—can explain these variations. Consequently, it appears that a combination of factors are likely to explain differences in the amount of time that children spend in care across states. Additional research using multivariate analysis is necessary to illuminate how these forces are associated with state differences and to further assist state policymakers in making decisions about child care policy.

The findings that do emerge from this brief, however, reveal that many children are in care for long hours each week and that the amount of time a child spends in care varies by state. These findings reinforce the importance of continuing to explore state differences in child care through state-specific data, such as the NSAF, and emphasize the challenges facing policymakers across the country as they work to develop policies to support the

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child care choices of families within their states.

Notes

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1. In other briefs, we examine the child care arrangement where the child spends the most number of hours each week and the number of arrangements used to cover the hours that the child is in care. Brief B-7 in this series examines the primary care arrangements of children under five nationally and across selected states. Brief B-12 examines the use of multiple child care arrangements by these children.

2. The NSAF is a national survey of over 44,000 households and is representative of the noninstitutionalized, civilian population of persons under age 65 in the nation as a whole and in 13 focal states. The survey focuses primarily on health care, income support, job training, and social services, including child care.

3. The states are Alabama, California, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin. These states were chosen because they capture regional differences and differences in state fiscal capacity and because they contain over 50 percent of the U.S. population. Colorado is also a focal state in the *Assessing the New Federalism* (ANF) project but is not included in these analyses. Due to the late addition of Colorado to the ANF project, responses to the child care questions from a large number of Colorado respondents were received during the summer months and did not provide information on nonsummer child care arrangements, which are the focus of this analysis. Because of the small size of the nonsummer sample from Colorado, it is excluded from the analysis.

4. For more information on NSAF survey methods, including the "most knowledgeable adult," see Dean Brick et al. (1999).

5. The mother of the child was the "most knowledgeable adult" for 83 percent of the children in the sample.

6. Because child care arrangements and the hours spent in care can vary widely from the school year to the summer, the observations with data on child care relating to the summer months (June 12 to September 26) were not included in this analysis. The observations that are included are weighted to provide representative data on child care during the school year. Our data set contains a total of 4,853 children under five with employed mothers, and each state sample contains at least 275 children.

7. The NSAF's questions focused on regular nonparental arrangements, which include Head Start, center-based care (nurseries, preschools, prekindergarten), and before- and after-school programs, as well as care in and out of the child's home by relatives and nonrelatives. The survey did not include questions about parental care, which could include care provided by the other parent, the mother caring for the child while she worked, or care for the child at home by a self-employed mother. If the respondent did not report an arrangement, the child is assumed to be in one of these "parental care" categories. We are confident that this measure captures parental arrangements because the share of children of employed parents with "parental arrangements" as the primary arrangement in the NSAF (24 percent) is identical to the share (24 percent) of preschool children in the 1994 Survey of Income and Program Participation who were cared for primarily by their mother or their father while their mother was working (Casper 1997). Because these forms of care are not "nonparental" arrangements, the NSAF did not obtain specific data on them and they are grouped into the "no hours in care" category.

8. The states that have the highest and lowest percentages of children in a given hours category are presented here. The states presented here with the highest and lowest percentages of children in each hours category are statistically different from each other at the .05 level. Differences among other states not presented in the text may or may not be statistically significant. In addition, one should be cautious in interpreting the actual point estimates because of the sizes of the state samples. Confidence levels around the national point estimates averaged +/– 3 percentage points, and the confidence levels around subpopulation point estimates within states were larger (+/– 7 percentage points for our state estimates of age and income subpopulations).

9. A low-income family is a family with an income equal to or below 200 percent of the FPL—i.e., $25,258 for a family of two adults and one child in 1997.

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This series presents findings from the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF). First administered in 1997, the NSAF is a survey of 44,461 households with and without telephones that are representative of the nation as a whole and of 13 selected states (Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin). As in all surveys, the data are subject to sampling variability and other sources of error. Additional information about the survey is available at the Urban Institute Web site: **http://www.urban.org**.

The NSAF is part of *Assessing the New Federalism*, a multiyear project to monitor and assess the devolution of social programs from the federal to the state and local levels. Alan Weil is the project director. The project analyzes changes in income support, social services, and health programs. In collaboration with Child Trends, the project studies child and family well-being.

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